

Esther Brunstein - But Not Without Scars

More than half a century has passed since the events I am going to describe took place, but for me not a single day has gone by without me reliving at some point the pain and the trauma. It just comes and haunts me. I still cannot come to terms with – let alone comprehend – the total, calculated destruction of the world I knew, and the life I was born into.

I was born in Lodz, Poland, in 1928 into a very closely-knit and enlightened working-class family. My parents were active members of the *Bund* (Jewish Socialist Organisation). Father was also very actively involved in the Trade Union movements and a one-time official. I had two older brothers, David, 18, and Peretz, 15 years old, at the outbreak of war. Peretz is the only other survivor, apart from myself, of my entire family, immediate and extended.

Life in pre-war Poland was difficult, and even as a child I was acutely aware of anti-semitism and personally experienced many jibes in my direction. But my memories of childhood are happy, because I grew up in a home where there was love and understanding. I was fortunate to attend an excellent secular Jewish school which imbued me with a love of humanity, a strong sense of Jewish identity, security and belonging. I treasure those memories and drew strength from my background in the darkest moments of my life.

My whole world started falling apart in September 1939. Just a week after the outbreak of hostilities, the Germans marched into Lodz. Immediately, life became chaotic and disorientated, and the Jewish population was threatened and deprived of every status which protects citizens under the law. Wearing the yellow star, identifying us as Jews, became compulsory. I remember so vividly feeling outrage, anger, humiliation and even shame. As a child, I bitterly resented being made to look different and shed many tears over it. But one day, I discussed it with a few school friends and we all agreed that we must walk with our heads held high because we had done nothing wrong.

We were afraid to go into town. Jews were beaten up in the streets, thrown out of their homes, forced to abandon all possessions and move to the poorest, most overcrowded part of the city, which was designated as the future ghetto as early as November 1939. The German soldiers used to amuse themselves by rounding up a few bearded Jews in a courtyard; then they would ask the Polish tenants for a pair of scissors and gleefully proceed to cut off the Jews' beards (or force them to cut off each other's). They made sure that many Jews were present to watch the spectacle. I was unfortunate in being forced to witness many such scenes. What still hurts so much to this day is the many pairs of scissors made available to the German soldiers by our Polish neighbours. Before

1939 came to a close, we as a family had had our share of misfortune. My young uncle, my father's brother, who was correspondent for a Bundist Yiddish daily newspaper, was arrested by the Gestapo. He was tortured for many months and then shot in a prison near Lodz. My brother David, like many other young men, left for the Russian-occupied territory. Many years later, here in England, I learned of his fate. He was on the point of going further into Russia to escape the rapidly advancing German army, but apparently missed his chance of escape by one day. On entering the city, the German army rounded up the entire Jewish population in the market place and shot everyone. He was 20 years old.

Many political arrests were taking place, and my father was advised to leave town because his name was well known and his safety was threatened. So on 31 December 1939, he left for a small town near Warsaw. This was the last I saw of my wonderful dad. To this very day, New Year's Eve has always been overshadowed by this painful memory.

On 1 May 1940, some 180,000 men, women and children were herded into the barbed wire enclosure which was the Lodz ghetto. It was officially closed and sealed off. It was like a maximum security prison surrounded by barbed wire instead of walls, with armed German posts at regular intervals. All contact with the outside world ceased for us on that day and escape was physically impossible. I lived through the Lodz ghetto until its liquidation in August 1944. Compared with what followed later, this was a lesser hell.

Despite unimaginable starvation, disease and constant fear, we did not give up hope and did our utmost not to become totally demoralised. In the ghetto, political parties functioned, schools re-opened for a while, meetings were held, lectures took place on all possible subjects, music recitals were held, choirs formed, theatrical performance given. Even demonstrations took place, with demands for more food and fuel, and I myself marched in some of them. By the skin of our teeth, we held onto some semblance of human dignity, trying hard not to succumb to the depths of despair where nothing mattered any more. And all the time deportations were taking place. Many of my friends died or disappeared.

Food rations were getting smaller and smaller and the gnawing pain of constant hunger had a devastating effect on all ghetto dwellers. Potato peelings could only be obtained from the public kitchens on producing a doctor's certificate. People at work received some watery soup once a day, but if you could not work because of illness, you were deprived of it. Mother became very ill in the summer of 1942 and so Peretz and I would bring home some of our soup ration for her every evening. I worked in a factory weaving carpets from second-hand clothing. (We learned later that the clothes belonged to deportees.) Peretz worked in a carpentry workshop and would occasionally bring home a few pieces of firewood – a great luxury. One day, he was caught and severely punished by being forced to work for two weeks clearing excrement. However, at the end of each day he was given an extra piece of bread. We often wondered, in those far-off days, whether the outside world knew of our plight and the heinous crimes being committed against mankind.

1942 was the darkest period in the Lodz ghetto. Deportations had been taking place since the beginning of the year. Mother was so ill that she had to go into hospital at the beginning of August. I saw her face, full of anguish and sorrow, and yet I could still discern a loving smile in her sad eyes. And I, not so long before, a happy and mischievous girl, was by then so timid and frightened – and so old at 14 with the pain and burden of my generation.

Then on 1 September 1942, the Germans arrived in the ghetto with trucks and loaded patients from all the hospitals onto them. Mother miraculously escaped, but my brother was taken hostage in her stead. Luckily, he too managed to escape in a most ingenious way. Had he failed, I would be the sole survivor of my entire family.

A strict curfew was enforced soon after, for a week or maybe ten days, during which time the Germans came into the ghetto with trucks and dogs and dragged away 15,000-20,000 people – mainly children and the elderly. No child under 10 or person over 65 was seen again in the ghetto streets. Some old and young who escaped deportation had connections within the *Judenrat*, the governing body of the ghetto.

We dreaded those round-ups. My brother Peretz and I might have stood a chance of not being taken, but there was no hope whatever for mother because of her outward appearance. Although she was only 42 then, she looked old and was very ill at the time. We did our best to avoid selection. As one courtyard led onto another and we knew all the secret paths and passages, we would run from place to place, hiding in houses that had already undergone selection. But very early one morning, the SS caught up with us. They arrived in trucks in front of our block of flats and immediately posted guards in every part of the courtyard. We were quite convinced that the end had come.

We lived on the top floor of the building and there was a big loft above, with access through a trapdoor, reached by a ladder. All of us – all the neighbours on that floor – decided in a flash to climb up the ladder and hide in the loft. We left the trapdoor open, hoping it would make it less obvious that anyone was up there. One young couple, whose gorgeous little girl of three was asleep in a wicker basket in their flat, thought it safer to leave her there, rather than risk her cries if she was woken up. They piled lots of bedding and clothes in the basket and hoped that the flat would not be thoroughly searched.

In dead silence, we huddled together. We heard the SS go from floor to floor and the screams of people as they were brutally beaten and dragged out of their rooms. They were our neighbours and we knew them all; most of them were too ill to leave their beds. They reached the top floor and we heard them ordering the Jewish policeman to search each room. We held our breath, praying for little Danusia, asleep in the wicker basket. Alas, in vain. We heard a big thump, something being kicked over and Danusia's cry of 'Mummy, Mummy!' Can anyone imagine what it was like for her parents and all of us in the loft not to let a sound escape our lips while Danusia was dragged away?

After they had searched all the rooms, we heard the SS order a Jewish policeman to climb up the ladder and search the loft. I was pressing closely to my mother and I

remember vividly bidding silently goodbye to my mother, my brother, my young life and all that was dear to me. The policeman climbed up, looked around and saw us, but we heard him say as he climbed down, 'No one up there.' It was a chance in a million that his word would be taken – but he took that chance, risking his life. The policeman's name was Jakubowicz. He survived the war but his wife and young daughter did not. It is probably thanks to his display of great courage – not an isolated case – that I am alive today and not fully shattered in my belief in mankind. It also afforded me the great fortune of being with my mother for two more years.

Still not abandoning all hope, with our will to survive so strong, those of us left in the decimated ghetto carried on and cultural activities resumed. It was our mental, spiritual and intellectual resistance against tyranny. At the risk of death, a few people in the ghetto surreptitiously listened to the BBC World Service and in April 1943 news reached us about the uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto. How we rejoiced and how proud we were of them! How we longed to have the opportunity to do the same! But alas, in the Lodz Ghetto nothing could be done because of our total isolation from the outside world, although there was talk of it.

In March 1944, my brother Peretz was deported to a munitions factory in Czestochva. I then became very ill and had to go into hospital, but came out in August 1944 in time to join my mother for what was to be our last journey together. I did not know then that our destination was Auschwitz. We were herded into closed-in cattle trucks, as many as would go into each one. There was barely enough air for us to breathe, with just a glimmer of daylight from a vent at the very top. There were two buckets in the centre; one with water, and one for our bodily functions. I huddled close to my mother; we talked so much, recalling happy pre-war years and telling ourselves that maybe at the end of the journey, there would be a nice place waiting for us. To this day, I really don't know how long that nightmare lasted. We seemed to be going back and forth and back again in semi- or total darkness.

When the train finally came to a halt, the iron bars were removed and the doors were thrown open. Many of our number were dead on arrival. We were pushed out – women to the left and men to the right – and told to form rows of five. Looking around, I saw barbed wire in the distance, and creatures with shaven heads behind the fence. (I learnt later that the wire was electrified and then understood why a woman, whom I saw touch it, dropped dead.) We looked at each other in fear and disbelief and were convinced that this was a lunatic asylum, that it was not for us, that it was only a stopover on the way to our real place of resettlement. What followed is the hardest memory to verbalise; for my mother, although only 44 at the time, did not pass selection for life.

To this day, I cannot fully recall the details of Auschwitz. All I know is that the experience has left me with a feeling of total madness, as if the whole world had fallen into an abyss of apocalyptic proportions.

By some miracle, I found myself selected for a transport to a labour camp situated on the outskirts of Hanover. Conditions were appalling; we were subjected to hard labour,

but at least we each had a bunk to sleep on at night and a daily food ration. But in mid-January 1945, our labour camp was disbanded and we were forced to march to Bergen-Belsen. On the way we saw nice, neat little houses, people peering out of their windows and even some civilians. So why is it that most Germans say they did not know what was going on?

We marched to Belsen quite unaware of the place and what might greet us there. My memory of my arrival there is hazy. There were 400 of us and we were herded into different barracks, which were already overcrowded with living and decaying corpses. Total chaos and the stench of dead bodies everywhere: that is how I remember Belsen, a living 'inferno'. I see myself – a skinny, bewildered 16-year-old – running from hut to hut, looking, searching, hoping to find a friend, a cousin or maybe an aunt still among the living. Everything seemed so unreal.

One day a friend told me to go very early next day to a certain point where a few women would be chosen to work in the kitchen, peeling potatoes and vegetables. I got very excited at the mere thought of perhaps having a little extra food. Luck was with me. I was chosen. I worked in that kitchen barrack for a few days and it was there, one day, sitting with my cold feet deep in mud that I felt a fever taking possession of my body. I was quite aware that it was probably the end of the road for me.

When moments of consciousness returned, I vividly remember feeling hollow and devoid of emotion. To experience emotion requires some physical effort, of which I was no longer capable. I was resigned to my fate, but felt deep regret that after so much suffering and the struggle I had to put up, I would not make it after all. I recalled the images of all those who were dear to me.

When I awoke from a dreadful nightmare, there were friendly, smiling faces around me telling me it was all over. I was too numb and too confused to make sense of what they were saying. I was liberated on 15 April, but have no memory of it as I lay unconscious. When I regained consciousness, I found four portions of black bread and four tins of Nestlé's condensed milk beside my bunk. I looked at the bread and burst out crying. I had so longed for, and dreamed of the day when I could just eat and eat, but I was too ill even to taste the food.

The first few days after liberation were joyous and yet sad, confusing and bewildering. I did not know how to cope with freedom after years of painful imprisonment. Looking out of the window, I could see German soldiers being made to clear the mountain of corpses. The inmates had to be restrained from attacking them.

I was taken to Sweden where I gradually regained some physical strength. One would have thought that after surviving this unparalleled tragedy, there would have been ample help and support to unite the remnants of families. Not so. Strict rules were in operation and no visas were issued to anyone without visible means of support. I waited two more long and lonely years before I was able to come to England in 1947 on a special permit as a domestic worker, a maid to an elderly couple. I was then able to join my brother, Peretz, who had been liberated from Theresienstadt by the Russians.

At the time, England had offered to take in 1,000 youngsters under the age of sixteen: in the event only 732 could be found. My brother Peretz had to lie about his age in order to qualify for entry into England.

When Belsen was liberated, *The Times* correspondent began his story with the words, 'It is my duty to describe something which is beyond the imagination of mankind.' There was murder in all of us who were liberated there, and it scared me. I remember praying silently, more fervently than I had ever prayed in all my life. I prayed that I would not forever be consumed nor destroyed by hatred. I would say that against all the odds, I have succeeded. But not without scars.

In memory of my parents, Sarah Rifka and Ephraim Fishel Zylberberg, my brother David and all members of my family who perished under the Nazis.

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